

[By Nancy Remsen, Burlington Free Press](#)

The Community Health Center in Burlington will receive \$10.9 million in federal economic-stimulus funding to construct a new energy-efficient building, twice as big as the existing structure on Riverside Avenue.

The project, which must be completed within two years, would create at least 25 to 30 construction jobs and 12 new health-care positions -- and expand access to primary medicine to an additional 2,000 Chittenden County residents. The health center serves nearly 13,000 patients.

The Community Health Center of Burlington was among 600 applicants that proposed \$3 billion worth of projects -- all competing for shares of a \$500 million pot in federal stimulus dollars earmarked for the network of federally supported community health centers. These centers provide medical services in locations where residents lack access to affordable care. Eighty-five health centers won expansion grants.

The health center in Burlington must raise \$400,000 for the project, which has an \$11.3 million price tag.

"It is a good day for primary health care," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who earlier stood on a stage at the White House as President Barack Obama announced the funding.

Sanders introduced a bill several years ago calling for quadrupling funding for the network of "federally qualified health centers" so the number nationwide could grow from 1,300 to 5,200. Then-Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., was a co-sponsor of Sanders' bill. Obama acknowledged Sanders' efforts to expand the health-center network Wednesday in his remarks.

Sanders worked to make sure the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that Congress passed last winter included money to expand health centers. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., who

lobbied for the funding in the House, said grants such as the one for the Burlington center fulfill the mission of the stimulus funding by creating jobs and enhancing services to those who might be affected most significantly by the economic downturn.

The ARRA legislation authorized \$2 billion for the community health-center network, with much of the money already released to add 126 new centers to the network. A health clinic in Springfield became Vermont's eighth federally qualified health center.

These health centers "are a model for the type of medical home we are trying to create in physician practices," said state House Health Committee Chairman Steve Maier, D-Middlebury.

"Any economic support for an active part of our solution in Vermont is welcome," said Dennise Casey, spokeswoman for Gov. Jim Douglas, a Republican.

The new round of funding supports major construction and renovation with projects that range in cost from \$792,000 to \$12 million.

The new building will be built on the back of the property on Riverside Avenue, which means care will continue to be offered in the older building out front until the new one is ready, said Jack Donnelly, director of operations. In its current structure, patients receive comprehensive primary care, dental services, free and low-cost prescriptions, counseling and interpreter services if they don't speak English.

The new building, which might feature solar energy and a sod roof, will contain 24 exam rooms, up from 18 in the old building; a dozen dental stations, compared with eight now; and seven counseling rooms, compared with the four available now.

Donnelly said he expects to seek bids by late January. Construction would start in the spring.

The health center received another federal stimulus grant earlier in the year: \$699,000.

Donnelly said this money helped upgrade information technology, renovate a satellite clinic and give a facelift to the clinic's waiting area.

"We had the opportunity to dream about what was possible for our community and our patients," said Grace Gilbert Davis, interim health-center director. "This grant turns dreams into reality for community residents in need of access to affordable health care."